

Let's say you're about to walk into a high-stakes meeting like a job interview or a first date. Should you try to talk and act in ways you think might impress the other person? Or should you "just be yourself"? Your instinct might tell you to change your usual approach to match the expectations of the person you're meeting with. But according to new research from Harvard Business School, that's not a winning strategy. The best approach is that familiar one: you really should "just be yourself."

Specifically, this study analyzed the effectiveness of what the researchers call a "catering" strategy. That is, tailoring your approach to appeal to the person's interests and expectations. And don't feel bad if you're the kind of person who might research the hiring manager before an interview so you can pretend to like their college sports team or favorite hobbies — because you're certainly not alone. The researchers on this study found that a whopping 71 percent of people think a "catering" strategy is more effective than simply being themselves. In reality, though, a catering strategy is *less* effective.

In one experiment, entrepreneurs in a high-stakes pitch competition who were genuine in their pitches were more than three times as likely to advance to the next round than when they said what they thought the judges wanted to hear.

So, yes, your mom was right when she said you should always be yourself. And there are two reasons for this. One, no matter how much research you do on LinkedIn and Facebook before a meeting, you'll always be guessing what your target audience is really like and what their expectations are. Two, pretending to be someone you're not raises your anxiety, tires you out, and makes you look and feel like a phony. And how well do you think you'll perform under that kind of pressure? Not well, that's for sure.

And science backs that up. In a job application experiment, people who catered to what they thought an interviewer would want to hear ended up feeling more anxious than those who simply acted like themselves. And the candidates who were true to themselves were 26 percent more likely to be hired than the stressed-out fakers.

Job applications and big meetings with strangers are stressful no matter what. It makes sense that you'd want to give the people what you think they want to hear. But catering actually stresses you out more and hurts your performance. Just be yourself. It's as simple as that.

Research: It Pays to Be Yourself. (2020, February 13). Harvard Business Review.
<https://hbr.org/2020/02/research-it-pays-to-be-yourself>

Gino, F., Sezer, O., & Huang, L. (2020). To be or not to be your authentic self? Catering to others' preferences hinders performance. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2020.01.003>